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Sun Magazine

THE BALTIMORE SUN

JANUARY 1, 1989

COVER

Photograph of Bea Gaddy by David Harp.

FEATURES

6 Dress-up Affair

By Clarinda Hariss Lott

A look back at dressing up for New Year's Eve and some thoughts on what suiting up really means.

8 Bea Gaddy: A Hunger to Help

By Alice Steinbach

The charismatic woman who has been running the Patterson Park Emergency Food Center for seven years has a past as fascinating as her accomplishments in the present.

DEPARTMENTS

- 5 To Wit The Name Game
- 12 Puzzles Stargazing/Missing the Mark
- 14 Dining Out Looking Back
- 15 Back Tracks The Escape of 'Tunnel Joe'

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EDITOR'S NOTE

FASCINATING LIFE OF BEA GADDY

I know that isn't a traditional New Year's Day story on the cover. But it's a good story to begin 1989 with, even though we aren't offering you a new hangover cure or predictions for what the next 12 months will bring.

The Sun has never done a major story on Bea Gaddy, and it seemed to me it was high time we did. A couple of years ago Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Alice Steinbach and staff photographer Dave Harp collaborated on a free-lance profile of her for a national magazine. A lot has happened in two years, Alice told me.

When Alice and I first talked about the piece, we agreed that we didn't want to make this just another "do gooder" story — although Bea Gaddy is a do-gooder to end all do-gooders. Readers have been so bombarded with articles on people who help the hungry and homeless that we were afraid another such story, no matter how well-intentioned, would never get read. So Alice wrote a story about a fascinating life. I don't have to urge you to send in your donations or volunteer at the Patterson Park Emergency Food Center one day a week: Bea Gaddy's story will stay with you long after you've forgotten anything I could say.

Elizabeth Large

In a minute, you will meet a shrewd, resourceful, persistent woman who, if you're not careful, will draw you into her world and make you care about it.

But first, a story: It is the middle of the night and a terrified 5-year-old girl named Bea is running, no, being chased by her drunken stepfather, through the streets of a small town in North Carolina. She stumbles and falls, but her 7-year-old brother pulls her to her feet. Finally they come to their usual hiding place behind some stores. And, as they have on so many nights — and days, too — the two children eat from the garbage bins in the alley.

This is the way Bea Gaddy, now 55, lived her childhood: poor and hungry and unloved. And it shaped, as all childhoods do, the way she views the world as an adult.

But here's the twist to the story. Out of a lifetime of having nothing really, Miss Bea, as everyone calls her, kept struggling toward something she'd always wanted — self-respect — finding it finally not through bitterness but through understanding; not through hatred but through caring; not through greed but through generosity. And although she is still poor and sometimes — the many nights when she gives away her own dinner — still hungry, it seems safe to say that Miss Bea is no longer unloved.

But here is a way to understand for yourself what Bea Gaddy is all about. To begin with, you might stand for a morning outside of the emergency food center she runs out of her small Patterson Park row house. In the line that's queued up for food, you might talk to some of the men and women who, in case you're thinking stereotypes, are both young and old, white and black. You might meet 33-year-old Darlene, who's small and tired-looking, with eyes that seem dimmed of all hope.

She's wearing a torn, hooded jacket and dark slacks. Shifting her weight from foot to foot, she has the look of someone who's used to standing in lines. Darlene is on welfare, has three young children at home and is not married. "Miss Bea keeps me going," she says. "Miss Bea has been talking to me about getting out and getting a job, and I've been trying out some programs. But it's hard with three kids at home."

Hard, yes, but not impossible. Ask Gloria Chambers, for instance, a 43-year-old mother of five who was on welfare when she met Miss Bea in 1983. "I wanted more for my children than welfare offered, but I had just about given up when I met her," says Ms. Chambers, who is sitting in the front room of Bea Gaddy's house. But through Miss Bea's encouragement — and, yes, nagging — Ms. Chambers trained as a nursing assistant and now does private-duty work.

But the work is not steady and it's often hard for Ms. Chambers to meet her expenses. So Miss Bea matched the younger woman up with the Emory United Methodist Church, whose members will help her out with such expenses as rent money and money for medicine when she needs it. They will be there for her, as Miss Bea puts it, "in her corner, as friends."

What Bea Gaddy is really trying to give these people is what she was always in search of herself: A sense of community, of bonds between neighbors, between families,

between schools and churches and synagogues. Above all, she wants to help them find their way, as she did, to self-respect and self-reliance.

"She's very sensitive about people's pride," observes Frank Martin, a neighbor who has lived in the same house for 37 years and admits to being "a little bit concerned when she [Bea] moved in and opened up the food operation." Retired, Mr. Martin now does volunteer work for Bea. "She does an awful lot of good. . . . If you say you're hungry, she finds some way to get you something to eat."

Finding a way to get somebody something to eat is a big part of Miss Bea's life. And if that means, as it often does, begging merchants for food or pestering the bureaucracy or raising funds through whatever means she can think of that's legal, then so be it. And be forewarned: She is so damn good at what she does, so smart, so convincing and persistent, that she often gets what she wants.

Bill Ewing, the executive director of the Maryland Food Bank, one of the organizations that supplies food to Bea Gaddy, likes to tell the story of how she once talked his warehouse manager out of some extra food. "She plays every angle," says Mr. Ewing, laughing. "But I don't blame her. In her position, I'd do the same. When she says, 'I will get enough food to feed these people,' she goes out and really does it."

It's time now — high time, in fact — to meet Bea Gaddy in the flesh. First, though, you have to catch up with her, a feat not unlike trying to jump onto a speeding express train that doesn't stop between 6 a.m. and midnight.

The train analogy works pretty well in describing her house, too. The narrow row house on Collington Avenue from which she's been running the Patterson Park Emergency Food Center for the last seven years is like Grand Central Station. The small kitchen in the rear is filled with women cooking huge pots of vegetables and potatoes and soup, and the steam clings like a silver film to the windows. There are chickens roasting in the oven and a pot of coffee is always brewing on the counter.

The living room at the front of the house has been turned into a work station for volunteers who are doing various tasks; the hallway is lined with boxes and bags of food waiting to be distributed. The center, which is set up as a non-profit corporation, feeds anywhere from 50 to 150 people a day. Since 1981, when she began keeping official records in order to qualify for certain food contributions, Bea Gaddy has given food to more than 100,000 families.

In the middle room is the office, a room with filing cabinets and a freezer full of chickens. Notes of things to do are tacked on every inch of the wall above the table that serves as a desk. The telephone never stops ringing. Volunteers are streaming in, some young, some old, some white, some black, some women, some men. A contingent of women arrives from a church with a contribution of \$400.

In the center of all this is Bea Gaddy, her coat half on and half off, not an unusual state for this woman who is always doing three things at once. She is talking on the phone: "Just come on over, ma'am," she is saying. "Now will be fine. Just come on over. We'll find something for you." Before she even hangs up, Miss Bea spots a young woman sitting in the front room, her shoulders hunched, fatigue etched into her face. "Fix this young lady some-

Continued on Next Page

BEA GADDY

A Hunger To Help

By Alice Steinbach



Alice Steinbach is a reporter for The Sun.

Bea Gaddy

Continued from Page 9

thing to eat," says Miss Bea to one of the women in the kitchen. "I know she hasn't eaten anything today."

Then, pulling on her coat, Bea Gaddy is off to give a talk to a group of fifth-graders at Harford Heights Elementary School who have collected boxes of food for the center. She's dressed nicely for the occasion, replacing her usual working outfit of slacks and a sweater with a dark pink jacket and matching pants. A woman of enormous charisma, her talk crackles with energy and an inextinguishable sense of determination. She speaks to these fifth-graders in an unpatronizing way, a way that suggests she takes them seriously. There is utter silence in the room as Miss Bea does what she does best: convinces yet another community of people to be drawn into her work.

I want you children to promise me something. I want you to promise me that if you know of a hungry family that's too proud to ask for help, you'll call me and say, "Miss Bea, I know a family that needs food." I don't know if any of you have ever been hungry, but it's the worst, the saddest thing in the world to wake up in the morning with a house full of children and nothing in the refrigerator, nothing in the cabinets, nothing nowhere to eat. And to tell your children, "If the teachers ask you what you had for breakfast, tell them you had food..."

If you know a person living alone, ask your mother or father if you can go to their house and knock on the door and find out if they're all right. Being your brother's keeper is what it's all about. Love is what it's about...

But we also need to educate the people we're serving. We need to teach people about voting, about working. And once we get into our new building — which will house 25 unmarried women and their children for one year while they learn a skill — we will have an opportunity to make them stand tall and say, "Count me in. I've sat too long. I'm going to be a person in the work force. I can produce — other than producing children." This is what we aim to do.

In some ways Bea Gaddy is telling the story of her own life.

She knows what it's like to be a statistic; to be a young mother of five children and wait for the welfare check in the mail; to have your pride leak out slowly, leaving you drained finally even of anger. And she knows the feeling of bone-deep hunger. It shadowed her life as both a child and as an adult with hungry children of her own. She describes that kind of hunger:

"Well, you drink a lot of water. And you pretend. You think about the big black basses — that's the fish my mother loved to cook when she could afford it — and you think about thick pieces of pork chops, and you dream. And you just continue to drink water. That's what I've done many, many times. And I learned to live for a week off a loaf of bread."

Bea Gaddy pauses. "And, you know, it's a terrible feeling. But all the times I was hungry, nobody ever asked why. When I used to eat out of garbage cans — right here in Baltimore — if people saw me, they didn't ask why."

Why, she wondered, didn't people help each other? And in that thought — born out of her own experience of hunger and the shame and isolation from society that went with it — lay the beginnings of the Bea Gaddy who exists today.

Born in Wake Forest, N.C., Bea Gaddy was just a toddler when her father walked out on her mother, leaving behind Bea and her two brothers — one a newborn baby, the other two years older than Bea. Her mother, who worked as a domestic, soon married again, to a brawling brute of a man who drank too much and was so abusive to Bea's baby brother that he was sent off to live with an aunt and uncle.

"My childhood was complete hell. Many days we didn't eat because when my mother didn't work and couldn't bring home leftover food, there was nothing to eat. And even when there was food, if my stepfather had been drinking, he'd come home and throw our plates out in the back yard or through the window. And many nights me and my older brother were gotten out of bed and he'd just run us all over that little town. He would tell us we were not his children."

Her powers of persuasion have grown and attracted increasing attention from both the business sector and the city government.

"And that's when we learned how to eat behind the stores. We were scared to go home so we would eat from the bins. I knew my mother was afraid of him, too. She had a house full of little children [by Bea's stepfather] and nobody to help her. She had to fight him, too, and after we got grown, we knew it wasn't Momma's fault." She pauses. "I can remember how my brother and I would go to an aunt's house at mealtime — and we'd just sit there like little dogs, waiting to see if she had enough food to give us."

She pauses and her voice sounds different, choked, when she speaks. "I try not to talk about it too often because it hurts too bad."

Bea Gaddy is sitting, as she says this, on a cardboard box in one of the upstairs bedrooms of her house. Of course, it doesn't look anything like a bedroom. It's filled with boxes of food, piled up everywhere, even on top of the bed. She's come up here to sit down for a quiet talk, away from the ringing phones and cooking chores and everything else she does during the course of a day. There's a hypnotic light pouring through the bedroom window and the sound of a barking dog out in the alley and suddenly you see — or, more precisely, Bea Gaddy lets you see — all the hurt and pain that's stored up inside her.

"You know, we talk about homelessness. Well, I was only really homeless one night in my life, but in another way I've been homeless all my life until I came to Baltimore," she says, pressing a napkin to the tears forming in her eyes. "And everything I do for people today is what I've always wanted people to do for me. To feed me, to care for me, give me warmth, to show me where I was wrong and put me on the right path."

But there was no one, really, to do that for Bea when she was growing up. "I got married to leave home," she

says now. "I got married just to have a place. And that turned out to be 10 times worse."

She moved with her husband, a drifter, to New York City. They lived, with their children, on welfare, "moving every month because you couldn't pay the rent." Her husband was shot and killed by an acquaintance on a trip back to North Carolina, leaving Bea with nothing.

In 1964, with the financial help of an old friend from North Carolina who was living in Baltimore, she moved her family here. From the beginning, it was a struggle to keep herself and her family afloat. She worked as a nurse's aide but had to quit to stay home with her children. She went on welfare and started "to drink a little." There wasn't enough money and sometimes her family "ate out of garbage cans." They went through a winter without heat or electricity.

But out of that miserable winter came a discovery that helped turn Bea Gaddy around. "I had a lot of time that winter to sit down and think about what being poor and hungry does to a person inside," she says now. "I never wanted anybody to know I was in such bad shape, because you think being poor and hungry is all your fault. So you're not going next door to ask anybody for help. But when I realized that it wasn't my fault we were hungry, it wasn't my fault my stepfather would run us up through this little town every night, and that I didn't cause us being poor — then I just started asking people to help me. And that helped me to help myself."

One of the people she asked for and received help from was attorney Bernard Potts, who maintained an office near Bea's neighborhood. "When I first met Bea, over 20 years ago, she was working as a crossing guard, but she was eager to learn, to move on," says Mr. Potts, who helped set up the corporation for the food center and acts as a legal adviser. "And when I got to know her, I saw she was a woman who was deeply disturbed that there are so many hungry people."

He encouraged Bea, who completed her high school education through correspondence courses, to go on to college. She earned a degree in 1977 from Antioch College.

She's been married for about 10 years to 47-year-old Lacy Gaddy, who works as a cook at the Convention Center. That is, when he's not cooking or delivering food for his wife. And just as no man is a hero to his valet, probably no woman is a saint to her husband. Lacy Gaddy laughs when he is asked if he was prepared for all this when he married Bea.

"I used to get headaches," he says. "But I'm used to her now. I admire her. She's a great woman. Sure, it gets hard sometimes but we work it out."

In the beginning, the Patterson Park Emergency Food Center was just Bea Gaddy begging for food from local stores. "I used to take a big garbage can on wheels over to Patterson Park Avenue and go to all the grocery stores trying to hustle food," she recalls. "I knew they were just going to throw away all this food anyway, so I thought why shouldn't they give it to us because we were going into those cans anyway."

Now it is at this point that Bea Gaddy, as we know her today, began to take shape. Something happened that made her realize she had the power to persuade people, to bring them around to her point of view. "I was just shocked when all these store owners over on

Patterson Park Avenue said yes, they would give us this food. I couldn't believe it. Here were these big folks saying, 'Yes.' And I just said to myself, 'Ain't nothing going to stop me now.' "

Her powers of persuasion have grown and attracted increasing attention from both the business sector and the city government. There's Linda Sherman at radio station WQSR-FM who raised more than \$4,000 to help Bea with the center's Thanksgiving meals. And Bea has managed, almost single-handedly, to get such sponsors as WJZ-TV, the Abell Foundation, the Noxell Foundation and Maryland National Bank lined up in support of the proposed Bea Gaddy Women and Children's Center. If all goes well — and there are obstacles to overcome — the center will open sometime next spring.

Her old friend Bernie Potts sits on the board of the proposed transitional shelter and says of a recent meeting: "You know, I got such a big kick out of watching Bea at that meeting. I looked at her and listened to her and couldn't help but think back over those 25 years. Something came up and she made her point so eloquently and so clearly that she swayed us. I admire that greatly."

Still, there's not enough money. "We have more people sending in sporadic contributions to the food center, so that's a blessing," says Bea. "But we still don't have any big money or any certain money we can count on. What we need now is somebody to help us expand the Patterson Park center."

And the proposed transitional shelter, at the moment, has only capital funding; now they need to find money for operating expenses. If things work out, maybe Bea, who has never drawn any money from the food center, will finally get a salary. But there are board members who are not quite sure that she has the "managerial skills" to run the shelter, a job that would require supervising "social workers with master's degrees in counseling and job training."

Michael Ahl, a former restaurant owner who volunteers for Bea Gaddy, laughs at such an idea: "You come down here to work for Bea and it doesn't matter what you do outside of here. She's the boss. She's incredible; a superwoman."

And Carol Melvin, executive director of the Women's Housing Coalition, says she is "real pleased to see a person who's experienced some of these things pull this off. . . . I'm always touched when grass-roots folks are able to do this kind of stuff. Unfortunately, the different issues raised by homelessness call for all this professionalism — and it's kind of sad because we're moving towards institutionalizing it."

Sometimes people meeting Bea Gaddy for the first time wonder if she's for real. Why would anybody want to work as hard as she does from dawn to midnight? Maybe, one skeptic suggests, she's just as egocentric as the rest of us and is in it for the recognition.

Perhaps. But if you meet Bea Gaddy and take the time to observe this woman who rarely sleeps but has a lot of dreams, you might come to a different conclusion. Perhaps it's something about wanting to pass on to the next generation what she's learned from life — no matter how hard the lesson. Perhaps what she's doing is a way of getting, finally, all the love that a poor little girl so yearned for. Or perhaps Bea Gaddy figured out this was the only way she was ever going to find the family she's been looking for all her life.

Whatever it is, however long it lasts, be grateful. ■



**Above, food is
given out at 140 N.
Collington Ave. The
Bea Gaddy shelter
on Chester Street,
right, will open
sometime in the
spring.**

